

## **Historic, Archive Document**

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"THE STORY OF DENMARK, TENNESSEE"

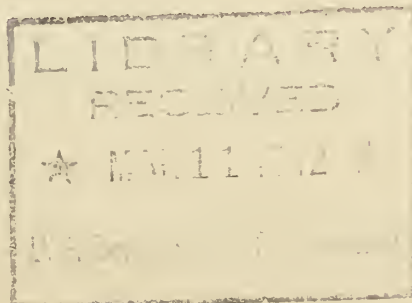
Broadcast No. 1 in a series  
of discussions of soil con-  
servation in the Ohio Valley.

WLW, Cincinnati

April 30, 1938 6 - 6:15 pm

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE  
Dayton, Ohio





SOUND: Heavy rain, blending into music, fading...

ANNOUNCER

Fortunes Washed Away!

SOUND: Music, fading...

RIES

The time, 1820. Enchanting legends of rich new farmlands beckoned to the pioneers of the Virginias and the Carolinas, and over the mountains they came. Westward they pushed the frontiers, seeking -- not the Seven Cities of Cibola -- but wealth in fertile soils, lush grasslands. They passed the Cumberlands, the Highland Rim, and followed Indian trails and streams into the Forked Deer country in Western Tennessee. Here, where numerous mounds indicated that the section was once a populous community of prehistoric people, settled the early caravan of the founders of Denmark, in Madison county...men like Stephen A. Carter, John Bryan, Abner Taylor...

SOUND: Barnyard noises, team of horses stamping impatiently...

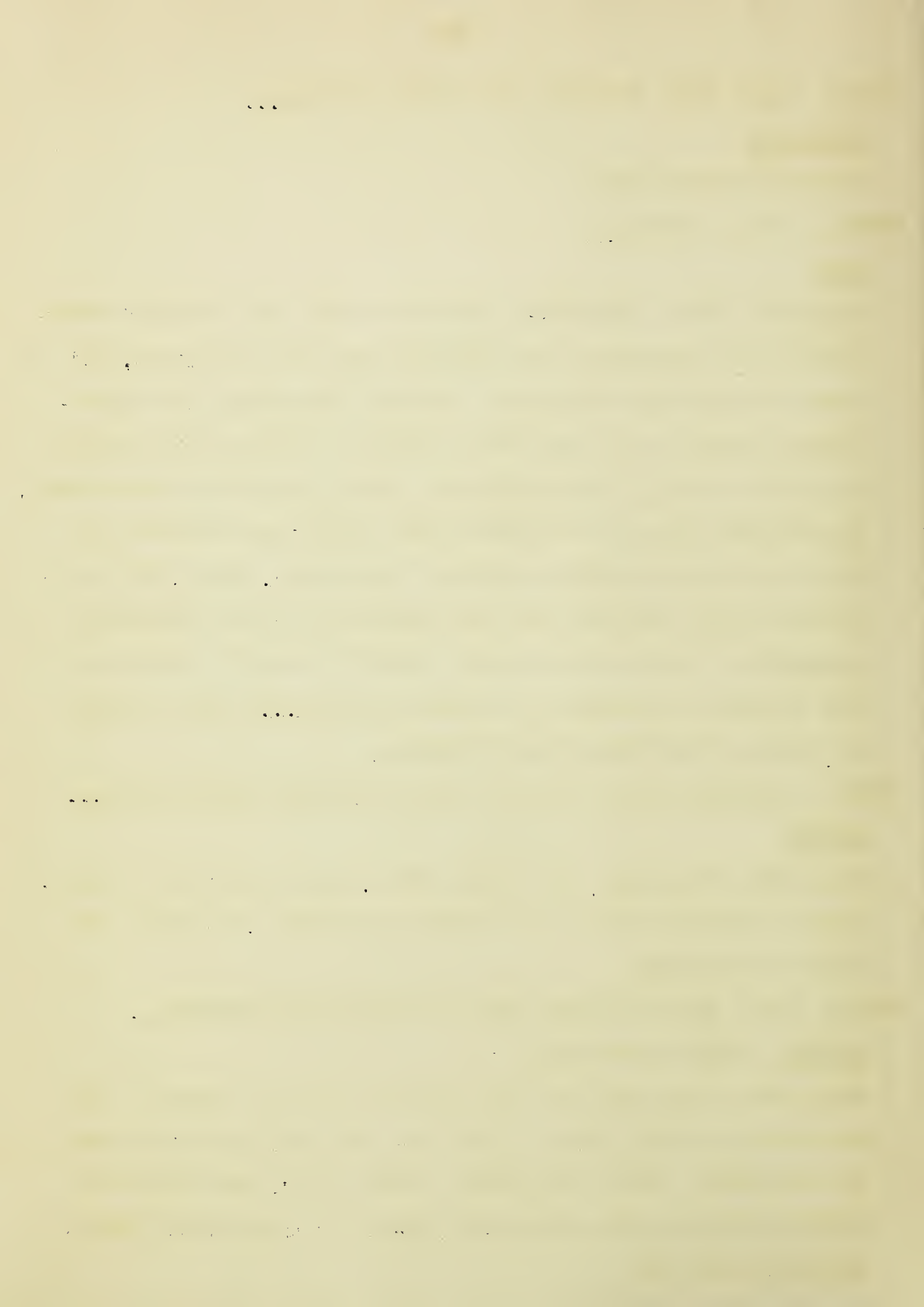
CARTER

Haw, boy! Whoa now. All right, Sam. Guess you're all ready. Tell Mr. Wright I'll be in Tuesday to collect. Go ahead, and easy on old Jerry.

SOUND: Wagon and team drive away, creaking into distance.

CARTER (Sighs contentedly)

Well, son, there goes the last load of cotton to market. Did better'n ever this year. I tell you, this is the finest land in the world. Ideal for cotton. Guess it's a good thing we moved in when we did, before the rest of the boys from North Carolina come on.



SON

Sure is, dad. This is good cotton land. Reckon we'd better cut that timber over there by Cypress Creek and put in more cotton. The trails are gettin' opened up now, so's we can ship it easier'n we used to.

CARTER

Good idea. That timber's no good to us, anyhow. We can raise many a crop o' cotton before that slope will wear out. Man alive! If all of these two thousand acres we got was put in cotton, think how much that'd bring each year!

SON

Guess we'll need it, with that new school building going up pretty soon. And they're talkin' about buildin' a better church.

CARTER

Well, we got to keep movin' if we don't want Jackson and Memphis to get ahead of Denmark. Why, Memphis hasn't even got a church! We're the biggest town in these parts, and we aim to stay that way...

SOUND: Music, fading...

RIES

Truly, Denmark was the metropolis of a rising frontier civilization. It was not until 1826 that Memphis was incorporated, not until 1827 that Memphis succeeded in building its first church. And in 1833...

SOUND: Galloping horse approaching, creaking harness as man alights..

SON

Dad! They beat us! Jackson got the county seat by one vote! One vote!





CARTER (Philosophically)

One vote. Hmm. Well, Denmark don't need the county seat anyhow. This is better cotton land around here, and we're still the best town, son, don't forget that. We're on the road that leads to Memphis, and they'll still have to send their cotton through here.

SOUND: Music, fading...

RIES

And Denmark continued to grow. As the city flourished, the fine stands of beech, hickory, oak, and poplar disappeared before the axe. In their stead came broad plantations of cotton: king of the south!

SOUND: Church bells. Horses and wagons going down the street. Voices in distance, as crowd gathers slowly.

BRYAN

Mornin', Missus Carter. Howdy, Steve!

CARTER

Hello, John. Nice day, nice day. Looks like we're goin' to have a pretty good crowd at church today, don't it?

BRYAN

Sure does, and it's a good sight to see all these people comin' to church. And notice all the pretty girls that are comin' in from that new woman's college over there. I'll bet young Steve isn't mad about that!

SON

Humph! Hadn't even noticed 'em. I been too busy seein' that the slaves get that cotton done. Still...there are some pretty ones, Mr. Bryan.



CARTER

Yeah, and that makes two colleges we've got now. They're comin' from Mississippi and Alabama and from all over the south, I guess. It's a good sign.

BRYAN

Well, it seems a shame to talk business on such a pretty Sunday mornin', but these new folks aren't goin' to hurt your shoe business any.

CARTER

You know, that's a funny thing. With the land so rich and cotton bringin' such a good price, I never thought I'd start a tannery. But like you say, folks must have shoos.

BRYAN

Guess you'll do all right by yourself, Steve. Did you notice the street yesterday? All of those wagons loaded with cotton. Twenty-eight stores we got, and everyone's jammed with business...

SOUND: Music, fading...



RIES

And in the midst of this age of optimism came...1888...a railroad through western Tennessee missed the growing city of Denmark by a scant mile. Instead of moving the city to the railroad, the plantation owners gradually moved to other cities. The huge plantations were cut up, and sold in small farms to the tenants who, in their eagerness to pay for the land at once, mined the soil for all it was worth. Like soil everywhere, it could be worn out. Years of continuous cotton production stripped the land of its fertility. Erosion -- enemy of farmlands -- tore away the topsoil and slashed the fields with gullies. But the farmland and the cities are inseparable. Today, Denmark, Tennessee, is a ghost town...

SOUND: Music, fading...

RIES

Only a few old residents remain. Men like C. E. Harris, men who have lived there a lifetime, look back...

HARRIS

That place used to be a good old place. It's no good now. Used to grow a bale of cotton to the acre. Takes three acres for one bale, now. Gullies like the Grand Canyon of the Colorado...





RIES

Steve Carter, grandson of a pioneer settler, sits quietly in his tiny store, one of three remaining...hoping that a proposed highway will bring back some of the town's prosperity...but the farmlands are gone forever. And H. F. Neville, the rural route carrier, writing a book of memories of the community it was, recalls the days when the old land pirate, John A. Murrell, made Denmark his stomping grounds...of the election on the liquor question, when the dries lined up on one side of the street, the wets on the other, with the wives carefully watching how their husbands voted...of the days when Denmark boasted 28 stores, two colleges, brick sidewalks...

NEVILLE

That old church is 73 years old. It used to be packed. Now if we get a handful in it we're lucky. We don't have a single school. Tenant farming -- mining the soil -- soil erosion -- that's what caused it.

SOUND: Mournful music, faintly continuing thru following speech

RIES

So, today, the remnants of this once-thriving little city -- one-time largest in that part of Tennessee -- are crumbling ruins. The fine plantation homes are gone. Schools have been abandoned. And for miles around, still evident are the fingers of the thief that wrecked the community -- soil erosion.

SOUND: Music fading...





## RIES

That is what happened to Denmark, Tennessee. It isn't a pretty picture, but it's a true one. The Soil Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture has cooperated in bringing this story, so let's turn to that organization for more detailed information. Here is Ewing Jones, of the regional office, at Dayton, Ohio. Ewing, your agency has been doing soil-saving work for many years, now. You must have run into many other sections that have felt the effects of erosion.

## JONES

You're right, Joe Ries. The story of Denmark is not an isolated case. It has happened time and again. Perhaps you've heard of the gullies of Stewart county, Georgia. According to our reports, one of the gullies started from the drip of a rainspout on a barn. From this small beginning grew an immense system of gullies called Providence Cave. The gullies vary from 100 to 200 feet deep and from 100 to 200 yards in width. Many other gullies are in this same vicinity, some of them approaching the same size. It all adds up to this rather startling fact:

seventy thousand acres of land in Stewart county, once good farmland, has been destroyed by erosion. Down in Hopkins county, Kentucky, below Dawson Springs, the little community of Macedonia has suffered almost the same fate. And here's one more example: Goforth, Texas, once a thriving trading center in the rich Blackland section. You should see it now, Joe; deserted buildings, somber, weather-beaten walls, decaying, lopsided, dilapidated houses and store buildings, rust-pitted gin machinery, desolation. And great expanses of the land barely able to support a sparse growth of weeds -- again, the result of erosion.



RIES

But wasn't it almost inevitable that our early settlers should mine the soil with little thought of future consequences? I can understand their eagerness to grow crops and still more crops to feed the hungry mouths of an expanding industrial civilization, how they cut down the trees and burned the underbrush, turned the sod under and plowed the steep slopes.

JONES

You're right, of course. I suppose it was the only thing to do. And in those days, people didn't worry too much about future consequences. They were busy with the present. But there's no reason why we should continue the same way. I believe most of us today know about soil erosion -- and the need for soil conservation. With dust storms drifting across the country almost every year, and with floods roaring down many of our rivers almost every spring, it's easy to see why people everywhere are taking an interest in soil conservation.

RIES

The problem is certainly a serious one. I've heard it said that Nature requires anywhere from 200 to 1,000 years to build a thin layer of new soil.

JONES

That's about right, and that same layer of topsoil can be washed away by a single rain. The trouble, Joe, is that soil is such common stuff, lying around us in such large quantities that its value is not quickly apparent. We just take it for granted. And the original topsoil here in the Ohio Valley was only about 12 inches deep. Some of it is already gone. And when the whole 12 inches are gone, the farm goes, and when very many farms go, the community goes.

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1891

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1914



RIES

You've mentioned a few instances, and I understand that they are more spectacular than most erosion problems. But on the whole, just how prevalent is soil erosion in this country?

JONES

About as prevalent as the soil -- it's all around us. It bothers the city man as well as the farmer. You know that from the soil that is washed from terraces in our lawns. And eventually it may be reflected in the prices we pay for food. I'm trying to keep away from statistics, but I would like to quote some figures based on a recent survey by the Soil Conservation Service. Out of all the land in the United States, it is estimated that 282 million acres have been ruined or severely damaged by erosion. On an additional 755 million acres, erosion has removed from one-fourth to three-fourths of the topsoil. Of our cropland alone, erosion has ruined 50 million acres, seriously damaged another 50 million, stripped the topsoil, or most of it, from 100 million acres more, and made a good start on still an additional 100 million. But let's bring it down to a single state -- Oklahoma. Oklahoma has 16 million cultivated acres. Thirteen million of them are already suffering seriously from erosion -- and about half of this seriously eroded area is scarred and gashed by gullying.

RIES

Now, wait a minute, Ewing: you're painting the gloomy side. How about the more cheerful aspects of the problem?



JONES

Fortunately, there are cheerful aspects. Here in the Ohio Valley region -- I'm speaking of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, and Tennessee now -- on more than 50 demonstration areas, the Soil Conservation Service is finding that soil erosion can be controlled if proper precautions are taken.

RIES

And those precautions are?

JONES

Such farming practices as contour cultivation, strip cropping, terracing, and use of more vegetative cover on the land. These methods and a dozen others are explained in a new Farmers' Bulletin called "Conserving Corn Belt Soil." It contains chapters on each of the items I mentioned, and a good many other soil-saving measures.

RIES

Is this bulletin, "Conserving Corn Belt Soil," available for distribution?

JONES

We have a number of copies that we can send out, so my suggestion is that our listeners write for a copy. Remember, "Conserving Corn Belt Soil."

RIES

That bulletin ought to answer a number of farming problems. But won't there be a lot of specific questions that will come up from time to time?





JONES

Undoubtedly, Joe, and this program, which is to be given weekly, seems a likely spot in which to answer them. So I'll just, here and now, invite any questions on the subjects of soil erosion, and soil and moisture conservation.

RIES

Now, one further point: what will be your subject next week?

JONES

Well, as I said, we've been painting a gloomy picture. Next week I'd like to show the other side, the hopeful side. And so what do you say that we tell the story of a typical soil conservation project here in the Ohio Valley.

RIES

And where is that?

JONES

No two projects are alike, Joe, but for a representative area let's tell the story of the Indian Creek project, over in Butler county, Ohio.

RIES

A good idea, Ewing Jones, and we'll see you then.

ANNOUNCER

Ladies and gentlemen, this discussion is the first of a series on soil conservation, presented through the cooperation of the United States Department of Agriculture. If you'd like a copy of "Conserving Corn Belt Soil," or if you have any questions concerning this subject, write to Soil Conservation, Dayton, Ohio. Let me repeat that: Soil Conservation, Dayton, Ohio.

SOUND: Music, blending into rain...

ANNOUNCER

This is an educational presentation of the Nation's Station.

